

Mortality Salience

Raymond Yates

University of Tennessee at Martin

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The awareness of inevitable death in humans is known as mortality salience. According to terror management theory, self-esteem and culture can provide some respite from the existential terror caused by the knowledge that the individual will die. Inner conflict arises when the knowledge that avoiding death is impossible, but the instinct remains to avoid it at all costs. This contrast brings mortal salience into effect, with the result being either distractions from the knowledge that the individual will die, or else actions taken to avoid death. Research has been shown to indicate that religious individuals are less vulnerable to mortal salience (Wojtkowiak & Rutjens 2011). Self-esteem has been shown to heavily influence mortal salience, with higher self-esteem correlated to the ability to cope with the notion of inevitable death more readily (Harmon-Jones, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & McGregor 1997). Additionally, the worldview defense, or strengthened connection to in-group, is a possible reaction to mortality salience. Near death experiences, on the other hand, cause individuals to develop a deeper meaning of life and greater sense of self. Research on self-esteem, death cognition, and psychological adjustment (Routledge, Ostafin, Juhl, Sedikides, Cathey, & Liao 2010) death cognition decreased life satisfaction, exploration, subject vitality, and meaning in life. Additionally, individuals were attracted to people with high self-esteem and avoided people with low self-esteem. Mortality salience has been found to be related negatively to civic engagement intentions, collectivism was positively related, and mortality salience and self-construal may not interact to influence civic engagement (Green & Merle 2013). Compared to failure salience, mortality salience has likewise increased the willingness to pay higher prices for foreign products, indicating that a death experience causes a world affirming prime to become present to buffer anxiety (Sullivan, Jonas, Jodlbaur 2011). Mortality salience has been shown to strengthen

ingroup identification. This process takes place with mortality salience strengthening perceived collective continuity then ingroup entitativity (Herrera & Sani 2013). Research has found that combat veterans were more accurate than non-combat veterans in identifying threatening, painful, or fearful expressions (Anaki, Brezniak, & Shalom 2012). In entertainment, mortality salience increased the enjoyment of a meaningful film, but only for those that rated highly for search in the meaning of life (Hofer 2013). Out of four studies on the effects of work focus mitigating death anxiety, obstacles increased focus on mortality salience, while the fulfillment of the desire to work buffered mortality salience (Yaakobi 2015).

Routledge et al (2010) conducted a series of studies on the effects of mortality salience and self-esteem on psychological well-being, growth motivation, and maladaptive behavior. The initial findings are of great importance since they provide the first direct test of death cognition in the form of existential anxiety and its influences on self-esteem and psychological adjustment that play a moderating role. Heightened awareness of death reduced subjective vitality, meaning in life, satisfaction with life, and exploration. Additionally, low self-esteem had socially avoidant behavior, anxiety, and increased negative effect. Despite using a variety of control conditions, the same patterns of results emerged when self-esteem and death cognition were measured and manipulated. In addition, these results were found when active death thoughts were present but outside of focal attention. These effects were also observed in American and Chinese samples. Further, weeks after a repeated death prime, the same pattern was observed in behavior.

Green & Merle (2013) conducted research regarding terror management and civil engagement. They found that high mortality salience led to a significant overall decrease of civic engagement intentions. Additionally, high mortality salience is significant with interpersonal trust. Comparing collectivistic self-construal conditions versus individualistic self-

construal found higher intention of civic engagement in the former. The authors list the nationalities of the participants as a potential limitation. Further, the population of the study were undergraduate students, and this may have influenced the findings.

Sullivan et al (2011) found participants whose worldview had been affirmed after mortality salience were more likely to pay higher prices for foreign goods compared to participants who did not have their worldview affirmed. This is consistent with past findings showing existential concerns influence foreign buying. When compared to failure salience, mortality salience had a higher incidence of participants willing to buy foreign goods at higher than native prices.

Ingroup identification has been found to shield people from death anxiety (Herrera & Sani 2013). Group continuity was enhanced over time by death reminders. This increases the sense that the group is cohesive which over time leads to stronger ingroup identification. This is in confirmation of the terror management theory that holds that people invest psychologically in groups because of the transcendence and permanence. Mortality salience triggers the alleviation of death anxiety by pursuit of self-extension. Over time, the group becomes more cohesive, making it feel more real and adding weight to its role of distraction from mortality. Social groups are used as agents because they continue into the future and further the goals of the individual after death. Regardless of self-esteem or need for closure, perceptions of collective continuity and group entitativity as well as ingroup identification are predicted by mortality salience. Beyond individual differences, ingroup as a continuous and real entity may serve as a shield for mortality salience.

In research conducted by Anaki et al, combat veterans were found to identify faces in terror, pain, or threatening pose more accurately. This research explored anger and fear, and while both are considered threatening stimuli, receptivity to fear was dependent on combat experience and mortality salience while anger was dependent upon combat exposure only. Mortality salience in noncombat veterans rendered their receptivity to fear expressions to be on par to those of combat veterans. The cues provided by threatening expressions are often important to survival. The authors supposition is that combat veterans either gain familiarity with distinguishing between anger and fear because of combat experience or formal training. Additionally, in social settings anger assists in regulating social behavior. In noncombat situations the presence of anger causes the recipient to either engage in domineering or submissive behavior. However, in combat situations where both sides feel justified, the response to anger is to overwhelm the opponent. Addition of mortal salience in both groups increased identification of fear expressions, which are uniform in function comparative to that of anger. While the research was focused on threatening expression recognition, the researchers found that those exposed to mortality salience were also able to identify sadness and happiness comparative to those without mortality salience exposure.

Yaakobi (2015) conducted research on work as a means to alleviate death anxiety. In his first study mortality salience was found to promote a desire to work with higher frequency than fear of pain. The second study found work increased in response to a desire to reduce death related thoughts. Work also functioned as a preemptory deterrent for further exposure to mortality salience. The studies were conducted in cultures where work had higher and lower value and maintained consistent results. This suggests that the mitigation of mortality salience is a function of human makeup and not culturally based. Fear of difficulties in finding a job may

impede the ability of work to reduce death anxiety. If work mitigates death anxiety, then unemployment may increase death anxiety. Work also functions as a shield preventing awareness of one's own death. Acknowledgement of one's own death can cause work to be seen as a pivotal part of one's life. While reminders of death and what constitutes work may vary by culture, the roles they play do not vary between cultures. Additionally, in some instances work may function to raise or lower self-esteem and have the inverse effect on death anxiety. Limitations to the study are predominantly in the group, which the author has noted as requiring versatility in future research.

Hofer's (2013) research consists of finding meaning in entertainment as a means of reducing the effect of mortality salience. Meaningful films were found to increase enjoyment and reduce mortality salience in individuals seeking for personal meaning. This was not found to be the case in individuals that were not seeking deeper meaning from the film they viewed. Mortality reminders serve to generate meaning in the individual, and as a result cause a corresponding decrease in death anxiety. It has been hypothesized by the researchers that had the individuals that were looking for meaning not been exposed to mortal salience they could have still found a hedonistic joy to the films they viewed. This opens up the possibility that the increased enjoyment found in this group could at some level be independent of the attempt to deal with mortal salience.

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